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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000286

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTY DEPUTIES COMMITTED TO UNITY AND CONGRESS, LACK STRATEGY

REF: A. MINSK 162

- [1B.](#) MINSK 262
- [1C.](#) MINSK 150
- [1D.](#) MINSK 187

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[11.](#) (C) Following the March 25 opposition demonstration, party deputies and regional party representatives are trying to rebound with a call for unity for all. In recent discussions, they admitted to us that unanswered questions remain -- particularly regarding coalition leadership -- but they have expressed renewed commitment to work together. Most party deputy leaders were hopeful that the coalition would hold the much talked-about democratic congress on April 21-22 in order to move the opposition forward. Deputies also expressed disappointment with the EU's "unclear position" on Belarus, noting that EU officials' attempts to engage the unrepentant Lukashenko regime contradict the EU's important message about the need for reform. End summary.

Unity is More Important than Leadership

[12.](#) (C) Since their last meetings with Ambassador (ref A), the opposition parties have returned to calls for unity among the opposition. During a March 26 dinner hosted by Ambassador for visiting EUR/UMB Belarus Desk Officer Stephen Gee, opposition party deputies told Ambassador that the United Democratic Forces (UDF) valued unity of the parties over the unanswered question of coalition leadership. Noting the relatively large and inclusive March 25 opposition demonstration (ref B), United Civic Party (UCP) Deputy Lyudmila Gryaznova lamented that the coalition had not been united over the past year and encouraged party deputies to put aside their internal differences for the sake of the coalition. Aleksandr Milinkevich representative Igor Lyalkov agreed, stressing that the question of unity is more important than such divisive topics as "term lengths of leaders."

But the Leadership Question Remains a Stumbling Block...

[13.](#) (C) Yet the questions of leadership and Milinkevich's response to Belarusian National Front (BNF) Head Vintsuk Vyachorka's rotational leadership proposal (ref C) still remain unanswered. Lyalkov stated that Milinkevich's movement has agreed to Vyachorka's proposal and noted the possibility of a compromise. However, BNF Deputy Ales Yanukevich, whose party's participation in the congress is

closely linked to Milinkevich's participation, encouraged everyone to be patient and not to try to solve all problems all at once.

14. (C) Pro-opposition party Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) Deputy Elena Skrygan proposed that the members of the UDF Political Council should share leadership responsibilities according to what they do best. For instance, Milinkevich should work with the international community, UCP Chair Anatoliy Lebedko should govern the national committee, while BPC Chair Sergey Kalyakin should focus on organizational questions, etc. She argued that if everyone was responsible for part of the work, there would be results: "It is not a question of pride, but of working together." However, during a March 27 trip to Borisov, BNF representative Dmitriy Babitskiy stressed to Gee and Poloff that if the congress aims to change the leadership, his party would boycott the congress.

Preparations for the Congress on Track?

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15. (C) Despite the unanswered questions, several deputies, especially from the left wing of the opposition coalition, are pushing for the congress to be held as soon as possible. Skrygan believes that the congress is necessary and that it should be held without delay, preferably in April to avoid further postponement. She stressed that with 540 designated delegates planning to attend, the opposition is strong and united enough to hold a congress. In addition, she added that a draft "Small Constitution" for a democratic Belarus and the economic and strategic plans were "virtually complete" (ref D).

16. (C) Party leaders in the Borisov region, who claim to have

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excellent relations and are growing increasingly tired of the coalition's stagnation at the highest level, want their party leaders to resolve their differences and hold the congress, thus enabling the opposition to move forward. Borisov UCP representative Lev Margolin told Gee that the future plans for the Borisov political parties were closely connected with the congress. According to Margolin, the local parties need the documents from the congress outlining the UDF's concrete political and economic strategies to be able to begin preparations for the 2008 parliamentary elections and reach out to voters on important local issues, such as regional economic development.

A Call for a Clearer EU Position on Belarus

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17. (C) Citing recent requests for dialogue with GOB officials from individual EU representatives, the party deputies unanimously complained to Ambassador and Gee of the lack of a clear EU strategy on Belarus. Lyalkov noted that individuals within the EU pursue their own goals -- inviting banned Belarusian officials to visit the EU, engaging in dialogue with Lukashenko, meeting with high level GOB officials -- despite official EU policies that prohibit such actions. Gryaznova reasoned that since Belarus is a small country with little economic and political impact on the EU, creating a clear strategy is probably not a top priority. Yet, all present called on the EU, with the help of the U.S., to develop a unified position on Belarus. When asked by DCM if they attached any significance to the profusion of EU flags at the March 25 demonstration, party deputies acknowledged the attractiveness of Belarus' eventual integration into European structures but stressed that the rallying point of the opposition will remain an independent and democratic Belarus.

Comment

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¶8. (C) The deputies' calls for unity and a dawning resignation that they must all work together to achieve anything appeared to trump the internal disputes and unanswered questions on the national level. However, they were quite frank about the limitations and disputes that still exist within the coalition. It is doubtful that the opposition coalition can sufficiently organize itself and receive GOB permission to hold a congress in Belarus by the scheduled April 21-22 dates. While some deputies reported that much progress has been made on documents and congress preparations, not everyone agreed or was aware of the developments. Unfortunately, it seems that the deputies are as stumped as their superiors on how to bring the congress to fruition.

Moore